

CLEVELAND PLAIN DEALER (OH)

9 September 1982

Jack Anderson learned early to dig deep, fight hard

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TV/RADIO

Jack Anderson, whose syndicated column appears in 931 newspapers in this country and many foreign ones, long has been regarded as the nation's top investigative reporter. Well he should be; he has broken more stories of private and governmental wrongdoing than the rest of the D.C. press corps.

Anderson is in the process of adding a weekly television show to his schedule. It will closely resemble his daily columns and will be carried here by WEWS Channel 5 at 6:30 Sunday evenings beginning Sept. 19.

Anderson visited Channel 5 Tuesday to appear on "The Afternoon Exchange" and tape a half-hour special with Dorothy Fuldheim to promote his show. He also found time to be interviewed.

I opened by asking him how a nice Mormon lad ended up in such a nasty business as investigative reporting.

He smiled. "I have to blame a scoutmaster who appointed me to be the troop reporter," he said. "In those days the Deseret News donated an entire page each week to the activities of Boy Scouts in the Salt Lake City area. I was 12 at the time and didn't realize what I was getting into.

"Before I knew it, I was editing the page and becoming addicted to the business. When I was 18 I landed a job as a reporter with the Salt Lake Tribune and eventually worked my way to running the city desk. I had worked each summer during my high school years at a small area paper.

"Then World War II began, and I became a war correspondent. With the cessation of hostilities, I decided that what I really wanted to do was investigative reporting. Since there was no better place for that kind of reporting than Washington, D.C., I went there and boldly marched into Drew Pearson's office.

"Pearson was then the biggest man in the field. He employed a large number of legmen, and my ambition was to become one of them. I guess he was impressed by the fact that I had credentials as a war correspondent when I was only 24 years old. For whatever reason, he hired me, and here I am."

Curious to know his opinion of broadcast journalism, I asked him to assess the worth of the network correspondents covering the Washington scene.

"Let me say first that there are a number of splendid reporters working for the networks and on occasion their work filters through the labyrinth of the overseers called vice-presidents. Unfortunately, that is the rule rather than the exception.

"The trouble with commercial network news is exactly the same trouble that afflicts network entertainment shows. There simply are too many vice-presidents or other executives who have a say as to what will appear on the screen. As a result, viewers see a terribly watered down version of news.

"There is another weak spot in broadcast journalism, and that is the star system it has created. Often a network will decide to feature anchormen or other big-name correspondents by sending them to a trouble zone to do on-

location broadcasts, to build their credibility and to showcase them at the same time.

"Most of those on-location reporting chores are a complete sham. For instance, CBS News sent Dan Rather to Afghanistan to mingle with the guerillas there and get to know what they are all about. What a joke! Rather was with them one day. That's not enough time to even say hello.

"I had a reporter living with the guerillas for five weeks. He marched over five mountain ranges with them, ate with them, slept with them and observed their fighting techniques up close. Heck, they wanted to adopt him into their tribe.

"Now my reporter got to know the Afghans and what they were all about. I also had a reporter who spent even more time with the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. That's the only way to learn about what is truly going on, what people in such organizations are thinking and feeling. You can't find out a thing in one day of posing with a few guerillas on camera."

Were the print medium reporters covering the Washington scene better than the broadcast ones?

Again, a faint smile broke on his face.

"I don't think they're a whit better, and I'll tell you why. They spend most of their time playing to one another, and the very last person they consider is the man who buys their paper. I don't attend many press sessions, but every time I have, I have been astounded that no one ever asks the right question.

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"They spend all their time dealing with matters that are not relevant to their readers. Those who are serious and work hard seem to believe that to be accurate means that you must write in dull fashion. The New York Times writers are the dullest in the nation. Worse than that, they all strive to write over the average man's head.

"I tell my reporters never to forget that milkman in Kansas City. He is the man you are writing for, and you must interest him by writing in lively, as well as accurate, fashion. If newspapermen don't wake up soon, there won't be a paper left in this country."

How does he stand the heat he generates in his kitchen?

Anderson's smile broadened considerably.

"I fight back," he said. "Pearson taught me that, among a million other things for which I'm deeply appreciative. When Nixon sicked the CIA on me, I began trailing the CIA around. When the FBI investigated me, I investigated J. Edgar Hoover. You simply fight back. You've got to fight back to survive."

Anderson, the father of nine children ranging in age from 32 to 14, claims his family is his only outside interest.

"When I pull in the driveway and see one of my married children's cars there, something fills me with delight. I know that I'm going to see some of my grandchildren, and a feeling of joy fills my being."

That sounds as if a tough reporter isn't all that tough inside.